

Administration of Barack H. Obama, 2009

Remarks at the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation Dinner
September 26, 2009

They didn't want me to be on the right. [*Laughter*] This is the CBC. [*Laughter*]

To all the outstanding guests here tonight, to our outstanding chair of the Congressional Black Caucus, Barbara Lee, please give her a big round of applause. To her outstanding foundation chair, Kendrick Meek, please give them a round of applause.

Majority Leader Steny Hoyer is in the house. The House Majority Whip, James Clyburn, is in the house. Chairman of the DCCC Chris Van Hollen is in the house. And my great friend and the chair of the DNC, Tim Kaine—please give him a big round of applause—Governor of the Commonwealth of Virginia.

I want to begin by congratulating all of the recipients of the Phoenix Award for outstanding contributions to American life. I have to single out one of tonight's honorees, for whom I can personally vouch, our Ambassador to the United Nations, Susan Rice. Susan is doing a fantastic job as Ambassador, especially this past week when we were at the United Nations, and we are all lucky, all of America is lucky, to have her representing us there. So please give her a big round of applause.

I look out at all of you tonight—on Members of Congress, on State and local officials, on leaders of all kinds—and I am reminded of the extraordinary acts of public service being rendered by African Americans today. I'm reminded of the difference each of you is making at every level of government, in the quiet neighborhoods of our small towns and the bustling streets of our big cities.

But I'm also reminded that it wasn't always this way. I'm reminded of a time long before the CBC was formed, long before the civil rights movement was sparked, when just a lone African American was serving in the United States Congress.

A North Carolinian by birth, the child, some say, of slaves, George Henry White was the last of that first generation of African Americans elected to Congress in the aftermath of Appomattox. But at the end of the 1800s, when a segregationist Supreme Court handed down "separate but equal," with African Americans being purged from the voter rolls, with strange fruit growing on the poplar trees, White decided against seeking reelection—meaning that once again, neither the House nor the Senate would be occupied by a single African American Member.

And at the end of an inspiring farewell address, the gentleman from North Carolina said, "This, Mr. Chairman, is perhaps the Negroes' temporary farewell to the American Congress; but let me say, phoenix-like, he will rise up some day and come again."

Members of the CBC, all of you gathered here today—tonight is a fulfillment of that prophecy. While George Henry White might not have foreseen the exact details of Montgomery and Selma, while he might not have foreseen the precise outlines of the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act and all the struggles to come, he knew that someday African Americans would sit in our city halls and statehouses. He knew that someday the Halls of Congress would be walked by Representatives and Senators of every creed and color. He

knew, as Frederick Douglass knew, as Harriet Tubman knew, as Martin Luther King, Jr., knew, that the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.

More than a century has passed since Congressman White left Congress. In that time, we have faced a number of difficult tests and bitter trials, as a people and as a nation. There have been dangers to peace and security; there have been barriers to justice and equality; there have been threats to opportunity. So we are by no means the first generation of Americans to be tested, but tested we have been. Most recently we've been tested by an economic crisis unlike any that we've seen since the Great Depression.

Now, I have to say that some folks seem to have forgotten just how bad things were when I took office. They seem to be exercising some selective memory. So let's just take a stroll down memory lane. Our economy was shedding 700,000 jobs every single month, more than the entire population of Baltimore losing work every month. Credit had dried up. Loans for everything from college to cars were nearly impossible to come by. Our entire financial system was poised on the brink of collapse with many fearing that what has been called the "great recession" would become another great depression. You remember that.

That's why we acted boldly, that's why we acted swiftly to put in place a Recovery Act that was passed with the help of Members of Congress here tonight and that's being carried out with the help from Governors and mayors here tonight. And as a consequence of those early actions, we're cutting taxes for 95 percent of working families—not for the rich folks, but for ordinary folks—putting some money in their pockets. We're extending and increasing unemployment insurance for 12 million Americans to help them weather this economic storm. We are making COBRA 65 percent cheaper so Americans don't lose their health care coverage if they're out there looking for work. We are saving the jobs of teachers and police officers that Americans rely on all across the Nation. And we're putting Americans to work rebuilding our crumbling roads and bridges and schools and waterways with the largest investment in our infrastructure since the Interstate Highway System was built in the 1950s.

Because of the action we've taken so far, we have stopped the bleeding in our economy. So the next time some of these folks come up asking you what the Recovery Act has done, you tell them it has prevented us from going into a much worse place. That much we know. That's been confirmed.

But we also know that we've got a long way to go, that the progress we've made has been uneven, and that this recession has hit communities of color with a particular ferocity. Today, more than one in seven African Americans are out of work, the highest in nearly a quarter of a century. More than 2 out of 10 African Americans—and 3 out of 10 black children—are living in poverty.

So this economic crisis has made the problems in the communities of color much worse, but we all know that these problems have been there for a long time. Communities were struggling to catch up long before this economic storm came ashore. One study that looked at trends in this country over the past few decades found that while roughly 7 out of every 10 middle class white children end up surpassing their parents' income, roughly 7 out of every 10 middle class black children do not. Think about that: for the majority of some Americans, upward mobility; for the majority of others, stagnation or even downward mobility. That was taking place over the last decade, before the economic crisis. That kind of inequality is unacceptable in the United States of America.

Now, bringing hope and opportunity to places where they're in short supply, that's not easy. It will take a focused and sustained effort to eradicate the structural inequalities in our communities, structural inequalities that make it difficult for children of color to make a success of their lives, no matter how smart or how driven or how talented they are. And that's why we're launching Promise Neighborhoods to build on Geoffrey Canada's success in Harlem with a comprehensive approach to ending poverty by giving people the tools they need to pull themselves up. That's why I've created an Office of Urban Affairs to lift up our cities with a coordinated strategy to unleash their potential. That's why my administration, under the leadership of Attorney General Eric Holder, is serious about enforcing our civil rights laws and tearing down barriers to equal opportunity.

But of all the barriers still standing in 2009, few are more unjust, few are more entrenched, few are more inhumane than the barriers to a healthy life and a good education; barriers that constrain the dreams not only of African Americans but of all Americans; barriers that can, and must, and shall be overcome.

For the sake of every American living today and for the sake of every American yet to be born, we must bring about a better health care system in this country—not in 10 years, not in 5 years, not in 1 year—this year. I know there are voices out there telling us we're moving too fast when it comes to health insurance reform. They're telling us to slow down. They're telling us to wait.

How are we supposed to tell Americans like Easter Spencer to wait? This is a woman who discovered a lump in her breast back in June and was told it would be 6 months before she was eligible for health insurance that would cover the cost of removing it. We're telling her to wait?

How are we supposed to tell Americans like Nathan Wilkes to wait? This is a man whose health insurance came with a cap, so when the claims started piling up because he had a sick child, he was left to frantically search for another option, or face \$10,000 of out-of-pocket costs.

Let me tell you: We have been waiting for health reform since the days of Teddy Roosevelt. We've been waiting since the days of Harry Truman. We've been waiting since Johnson and Nixon and Clinton. We cannot wait any longer. "There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over." There comes a time to remember the fierce urgency of right now.

Now is the time to enact health insurance reform in the United States of America. Now is the time to offer stability and security to Americans who have insurance. Now is the time to make it affordable for those who don't have health insurance. Now is the time to slow the growth of health care costs for our families and business, our Government. That's the kind of reform that we need. Now is the time. And that's what so many Members of Congress here tonight and all across the country are working so hard to produce.

Now, many of you are probably familiar with our plan, but I just want to go over a few things so you know what to tell your friends and neighbors and folks in the community who ask about it because they may be seeing some misinformation—just a little bit. *[Laughter]* I was up at the G-20—just a little aside—I was up in the G-20, and some of you saw—there's big flags and all the world leaders come in and Michelle and I are shaking hands with them. And one of the leaders—I won't mention who it was—*[laughter]*—he comes up to me. We take the picture; we go behind, and he says, "Barack, explain to me this health care debate." He says, "We don't understand it. You're trying to make sure everybody has health care, and they're putting a Hitler mustache on you. I don't—that doesn't make sense to me. Explain that to me." He didn't understand. So let me just clarify.

If you already have health insurance, under the plan we've developed, you will not, I repeat, you will not have to change your coverage or your doctor. We are not requiring those changes in this legislation.

What we will do is make insurance work better for everybody. It will be against the law for insurance companies to deny you coverage because of a preexisting condition. It will be against the law for insurance companies to drop your coverage when you get sick, or water it down when you need it the most. They won't be able to place some arbitrary cap on how much coverage you can receive in a given year or a lifetime. We will place a limit on how much you can be charged for out-of-pocket expenses. Because in the United States of America, nobody should go broke because they got sick.

We will make it easier to identify health care disparities and work to close them. That's long overdue. And insurance companies will be required to cover, at no extra charge, routine checkups and preventive care, like mammograms and colonoscopies. There's no reason we shouldn't be catching diseases like breast cancer before they get worse. That makes sense; it saves money; it saves lives; that's what we're going to do.

So that's what we do for the folks with health insurance. And we'll finally offer the tens of millions of Americans who don't have health insurance some affordable choices. We'll do this with a new insurance exchange, a marketplace where individuals and small businessmen can shop for affordable health insurance plans that work for them—as one big group, so they'll have leverage to get a better deal than they get right now, a much better deal. And that is going to save them money.

Now, there are going to be some who claim that, "Well, this is a Government takeover of health care." There are going to be some who suggest that they're going to lose their choices. We are talking about expanding choices. And I just want everybody to remember that they said the same thing when we tried to pass Social Security. They called FDR all kinds of things that we cannot repeat here today. They said the same thing about Lyndon Johnson when we tried to pass Medicare. They are saying the same things now, trying the same tactics, but we are going to get this done this year thanks to members of the CBC and Members of Congress all across the country, and thanks to you at the grassroots level that are going to stand up and insist that we cannot afford to wait any longer.

Now, the key to progress for all Americans is not just healthy bodies; it's also a well-educated mind. And we know that the African American community will fall behind in the United States and the United States will fall behind in the world unless we do a far better job than we've been doing of educating our sons and daughters; unless we close the achievement gap that sees black students and brown students lag behind their white classmates year after year, decade after decade; unless we reach all the students who are dropping out of school and giving up on their future.

Today, almost a third of students drop out of high school—a third—and a disproportionate number of them are African American or Hispanic. That's not just a loss for the African American community or the Hispanic community; that's a loss for all Americans. That's the future workforce. In the 21st century, when a good education is a prerequisite for success, when the jobs of tomorrow require a bachelor's degree or more, when the countries that outeducate us today will outcompete us tomorrow, we need the talents, the energy, the contributions of all our children, not just some. We need to prepare every child in America to compete with any worker in the world.

Now, there are a number of things Government can do to offer our kids a 21st century education. It can increase Pell grants and Perkins loans and simplify financial aid forms. It can establish better standards and assessments in our schools. It can reward teachers who are doing a great job and move bad ones out of the classroom. It can improve quality in early learning initiatives. It can rebuild our crumbling schools. It can offer all our children a complete and competitive education from cradle to classroom, from college through a career. That's what Government can do. That's what Government must do. And that's exactly what we've begun to do, here in Washington, across this country.

And I've said it before—and I know I may sound like a broken record—but I'm going to say it again: Government alone cannot get our children to the promised land. Government can't put away the PlayStation. Government can't put our kids to bed at a reasonable hour. Government can't attend those parent-teacher conferences. Government can't read a book to your child at night. Government can't help them with their homework. Government can't make sure they leave to school on time. These are things only a mother can do and a father can do. These are things that a parent can do.

We need to accept our responsibilities, as parents and community leaders. We need to be good role models and encourage excellence in all our children, every last one of them. We need to let them know there are no excuses for not doing your best every day, all the time, in order to achieve your dreams.

We've got to push our kids to aim higher. I don't want all our kids aspiring to be ballers or rappers. I want them aspiring to be teachers and doctors and scientists and engineers. I want them aspiring to be Members of Congress and Supreme Court Justices. I want them aspiring to be the President of the United States of America. I want them to have their sights set high.

No excuses for mediocrity. If they come home with a B, don't tell them, "That's great." I know some of you all do that. *[Laughter]* Tell them to work harder and get an A. Set their heights high.

A world-class education; affordable, quality health insurance; jobs and opportunity; all of us accepting responsibility for ourselves and our children and our common future, that's how we'll make life better for the African American community, and thereby make life better for the larger American community. That is how we will build a new foundation for our economy that yields lasting, shared prosperity. That's how we'll take up the cause of freedom and justice and equality in our time, just as earlier generations of Americans took it up in theirs.

Remember what it was like for George Henry White in the early days of the 20th century, as he was bidding farewell to the House of Representatives, the last African American to serve there for a quarter century. Remember the taunts and the threats and the attacks braved by White, braved by Lewis, braved by Chisholm. Remember all they did, all so many others did, to make it possible for us to be here tonight, to make it possible for you to be here tonight, to make it possible for me to be here tonight.

Because I know that if we can act as they did—with the same sense of unity, the same sense of possibility, the same determination, the same sense of purpose—then we will not only help America's peoples live healthier lives, we won't just help America's children live out their dreams, but it will be said of us, as it was said of our forbearers, that when the need was great and the moment was hard, when the odds seemed against us, we did our part to perfect our Union.

Thank you. God bless you. And God bless the United States of America.

NOTE: The President spoke at 8:20 p.m. at Walter E. Washington Convention Center. In his remarks, he referred to Geoffrey Canada, president and chief executive officer, Harlem Children's Zone. The transcript was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on September 27.

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Names: Canada, Geoffrey; Clinton, William J.; Clyburn, James E.; Holder, Eric H., Jr.; Hoyer, Steny H.; Kaine, Timothy M.; Lee, Barbara; Meek, Kendrick B.; Obama, Michelle; Rice, Susan E.; Van Hollen, Christopher, Jr.

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